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STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #3

(Desired family size and improved health sustainably achieved)

Male sex workers vulnerable to AIDS

By JENNY F. MANONGDO

Lack of “men-friendly” clinics, incorrect beliefs in sexual health, and fear of discrimination by health service providers make Filipino male sex workers more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection, leaving one in every three men with at least one sexually transmitted infection (STI), a recent survey said.

An integrated behavioral and biological assessment among men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) in selected sites in the Philippines, conducted by the Family Health International (FHI) and the Center for Multidisciplinary Studies on Health and Development (CEMSHAD) which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), was conducted last year in Baguio City, Pagsanjan, Puerto Gallera, Manila, Quezon City and Pasay City.

The study gathered 261 respondents in each place which identified the constructions of their sexual identities and sexual behavior patterns, including how they identify themselves for consensual or commercial sex, health seeking behaviors and sexual practices.

The study found that MSMs proliferate in cinemas, especially in Baguio City and Manila. Many of them could also be found in parks, malls, hotels, streets, bars and other crowded places.

“Naku, paikot-ikot lang kami. Ang Metro Manila ay parang mall, marami kang pwedeng istambayan at pagpilian ... it can be endless katulad sa (area) sa Malate, minsan pag sinuswerte, mabango at galante ang hada ko (We just go around. Metro Manila is like a mall. There are many to choose from. It can be endless like in Malate. If you are lucky, you can get generous men).” said a 26-year-old MSM from Quezon City.

It said that there is basically low condom use in this population and whenever there is anal sex, it is usually unprotected.

The study said that 48 percent of MSM in Metro Manila have STI, while 30 percent of MSM in Baguio City also suffer from the disease. Eighty percent of male sex workers in Metro Manila had multiple sex partners, 98 percent

had anal sex, and 56 percent had unprotected sex.

“Previously, many prefer oral sex, but now anal sex is becoming more common,” Dr. Ma. Elena Borromeo, country coordinator of USAID said.

In Baguio City, 57 percent of MSMs have multiple partners, 99 percent had anal sex, and 84 percent had unprotected anal sex.

Male sex workers do not use condom although many of them know that it can protect them against STI.

At least 65 percent of MSM in Metro Manila know that condom can prevent HIV infection and 56 percent of their counterparts in Baguio City know this as well.

However, thirty-eight percent of MSM in Metro Manila think that condom can reduce sexual pleasure and 49 percent of male sex workers in Baguio City have similar thoughts.

A small proportion or 11 percent of the respondents in Metro Manila said that condom is not available during the act and 15 percent of Baguio City respondents have the same reasons.

There is a low coverage in MSM education on HIV and AIDS. Only a few or 25 percent and 32 percent of MSM in Metro Manila and Baguio City attended lectures about sexually transmitted diseases the past three months, the survey showed.

Health authorities said that those that were exposed to interventions still require a change in behavior on the use of protection devices during sexual activity.

Due to this, 81 percent of male sex workers in Metro Manila have had STI symptoms in the past 12 months when the survey was conducted and 78 percent of their counterparts in Baguio City reported the same.

Though they felt they were sick, a greater majority preferred to self-medicate while a few went to clinics. A smaller number did nothing at all.

In Pagsanjan, those who felt they have symptoms of STI commonly drink “buko juice” or coconut milk, instead of going to clinics for help. In Baguio City, MSM believe that drinking soap suds can prevent STI.

In Puerto Galera, drinking of liquor was cited as one of the STI prevention practices among MSM.

(Source: Manila Bulletin, 8/30/05, page 6)